Rapid and Participatory Rural Appraisal

The techniques associated with Rapid Rural Appraisal are no longer regarded as cheap and dubious: if carried out well they can reveal information of a quality and range which would escape traditional methods. Robert Chambers describes progress with RRA and a new element of participation by the subjects of surveys, the villagers themselves.

THE PHILOSOPHY, approaches and methods now known as Rapid Rural Appraisal (RRA) began to coalesce in the late 1970s. There was growing awareness both of the biases of rural development tourism — the phenomenon of the brief rural visit by the urban-based professional — and of the costs, inaccuracies and delays of large-scale questionnaire surveys. More cost-effective mehods were sought for outsiders to learn about rural people and conditions.

In those days most professionals were reluctant to write about and publish the 'informal' methods they invented and used. They feared for their professional credibility. They felt compelled to conform to standardized statistical norms, however costly and crude their application. In the 1980s, though, RRA's own principles and rigour became more evident. As the 1980s began, RRA was argued to be cost-effective, especially for gaining timely information, but with some sense that it might be a second-best. By the end of the 1980s, RRA methods were more and more eliciting a range and quality of information and insights inaccessible to more traditional methods. To my surprise, wherever RRA was tested against more conventional methods, it came out better. RRA, when well done, has shown itself again and again to be not a second-best but a best.

Chris Steele-Perkins/Christian Aid

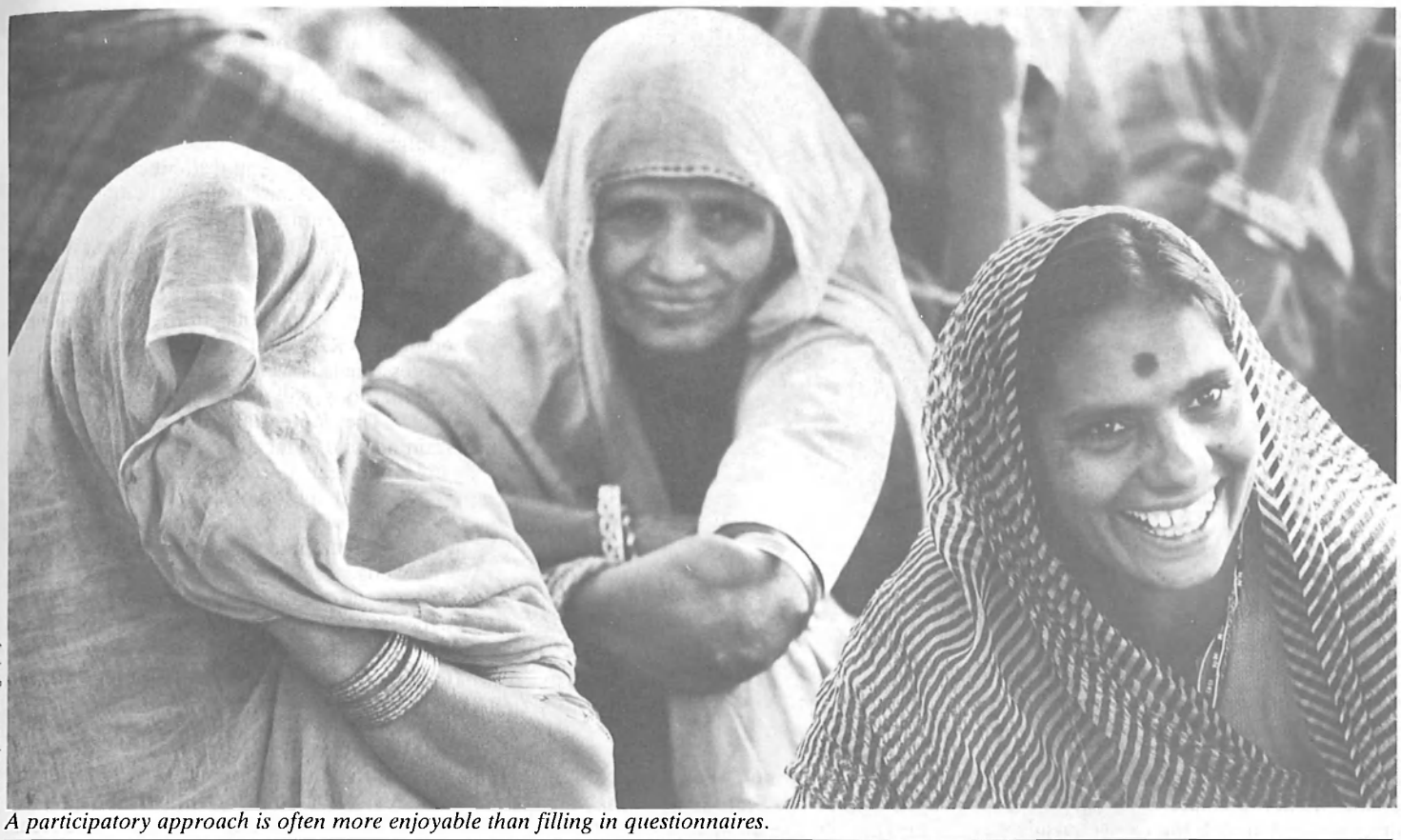
Women are often too busy with domestic tasks to contribute willingly to group meetings.

In establishing the principles and methods of RRA many people and institutions have taken part. An incomplete listing of countries where the methods have been developed is Australia, Bangladesh, Benin, Ethiopia, Fiji, Ghana, Guatemala, India, Indonesia, Kenya, Mali, Nepal, Nigeria, Pakistan, Papua New Guinea, Peru, the Philippines, Sri Lanka, Sudan, Tanzania, Thailand, the United Kingdom, Zambia and Zimbabwe. Perhaps more than any other study, the analysis of agro-ecosytems, pioneered in South-east Asia by Gordon Conway and others, established new methods and credibility. The University of Khon Kaen in North-eastern Thailand has been a world leader in developing theory and methods, especially for multidisciplinary teams, and in institutionalizing RRA as a part of professional training. Now, as we enter the 1990s, 'hard' journals regularly publish articles on RRA. The problem now is not just to gain wider acceptance for RRA, but also to ensure quality, so that when it is done, it is done well.

Principles

Different practitioners would list different principles, but most would agree to include the following:

- **Optimizing trade-offs**, relating the costs of learning to the useful truth of information, with trade-offs between quantity, relevance, accuracy and timeliness. This includes the principles of optimal ignorance — knowing what it is not worth knowing — and of appropriate imprecision — not measuring more precisely than is needed.
- **Offsetting biases**, especially those of rural development tourism, by being relaxed and not rushing, listening not lecturing, probing instead of passing on to the next topic, being unimposing instead of important, and seeking out the poorer people and what concerns them.
- **Triangulating**, meaning using more than one, and often three, methods or sources of information to cross-check answers.
- **Learning from and with rural people**, directly, on the site, and face-to-face, gaining from indigenous physical,



Sunil Gupta Photography

A participatory approach is often more enjoyable than filling in questionnaires.

technical and social knowledge.

- **Learning rapidly and progressively**, with conscious exploration, flexible use of methods, opportunism, improvization, iteration, and cross-checking, not following a blueprint programme but adapting through a learning process.

The menu of methods

In its early days, RRA seemed little more than organized commonsense. During the 1980s, though, much creative ingenuity has been applied and more methods invented. A summary listing of headings can give some indication of the types of methods now known, without being exhaustive:

- secondary data review;
- direct observation, including wandering around;
- DIY (doing-it-yourself, taking part in activities);
- finding key informants;
- semi-structured interviews;
- group interviews;
- chains (sequences) of interviews;
- key indicators;
- workshops and brainstorming;
- transects (cutting across the area of investigation in a straight line) and group walks;
- mapping and aerial photographs;
- diagrams;
- ranking, stratifying and quantification;
- ethnohistories;
- time lines (chronologies of events);
- stories, portraits and case studies;
- team management and interactions;
- key probes;
- short, simple questionnaires, late in the RRA process;
- rapid report writing in the field.

Drawing diagrams and ranking have provided some of the less obvious methods. Diagrams can be used for many topics, aspects and techniques, such as transects, seasonalities, spatial and social relations, institutions, trends, and ecological history. Ranking methods have been evolved to elicit people's own criteria and judgments. An ingenious and simple example is Barbara Grandin's wealth ranking, in which respondents are presented with slips of paper, one for each household in a community, and asked to place them in piles according to their wealth or poverty. These and other methods are being modified and developed, and more will be invented in coming years. One of the delights of RRA is the lack of blueprint, and the encouragement to practitioners to improvize in a spirit of play.

Participatory Rural Appraisal

RRA began as a better way for outsiders to learn. In answering the question 'whose knowledge counts?' it sought to enable outsiders to learn from rural people, and to make use of indigenous technical knowledge to assist outsiders' analysis. Its mode was mainly extractive. Knowledge can also been articulated and generated in more participatory ways, however, in which investigation, presentation and analysis are carried out more by rural people themselves, in which they 'own' the information, and in which they identify the priorities.

Participatory Rural Appraisal (RRA) draws on several traditions, including the community development of the 1950s and 1960s, the dialogics and conscientization of Paulo Freire, participatory action research, and the work of activist NGOs in many parts of the world which have encouraged poor people to undertake their own analysis and action. The participatory orientation of PRA has given new impetus to the development of methods.

Visual sharing is a common element in much PRA. With a questionnaire survey, information is transferred from the words of the person interviewed to the paper of the questionnaire schedule where it becomes a possession of the interviewer. The learning is one-off. The information becomes personal and private, owned by the interviewer and unverified. In contrast, with visual sharing of a map, model, diagram, or units (stones, seeds, small fruits, etc.) used for quantification, all can see, point to, discuss, manipulate and alter physical objects or representations. The learning is progressive. The informaiton is visible and public, owned and verified by participants.

To give examples, in participatory mapping and modelling, villagers draw and model their villages and resources, deciding what to include, and debating, adding and modifying detail. Everyone can see what is being 'said' because it is being 'done'. In shared diagrams, information is drawn to represent, for example, seasonal changes in dimensions such as rainfall, agricultural labour, income, indebtedness, food supply and migration. Paper can be used for diagrams, but the ground and other local materials have the advantage of being 'theirs', media which villagers can command and alter with confidence. To date, rural

Jack Ling/UNICEF

Conventional questionnaire surveys are usually more expensive to run and more rigid in structure than the techniques employed with RRA.

people have been found to have a much greater ability to create, understand and use diagrams and models than most outsiders are inclined to suppose.

PRA has many advantages. By transferring the initiative to rural people, it generates rapport, and forces outsiders to learn. It elicits, presents and cross-checks much information in little time. And like much RRA, it is far, far more interesting and enjoyable for all concerned than conventional questionnaires. Moreover, through encouraging rural people to present and analyse what they know, it can generate commitment to sustainable action, as it has done in both Kenya and India. Two NGOs in South India — MYRADA and Youth for Action — have each separately used it over four or five days during which time an outside team camped in a village. In both cases, the PRA concluded with an agreed programme of action by villagers and by the NGO. With PRA it is not just a question of shared knowledge, but of shared analysis, creativity and commitment.

Dangers

RRA and PRA face dangers. Like farming systems research, RRA will doubtless be discredited by over-rapid adoption and misuse. The warning signs are there: demand for training which exceeds by far the competence of the trainers available; requirements that consultants 'use RRA', and then consultants who say they will do so, when they do not know what it entails; and the belief that good RRA is simple and easy, a quick fix, when in fact it is quite difficult to do well. RRA is a culture and a set of attitudes: its methods require skill, and some people are better at it than others. The word 'rapid' can also be used to justify rushing, and to legitimate biased rural development tourism, when really the 'r' of RRA should stand for 'relaxed', allowing plenty of time. And above all, there is the danger that the hurry or lack of commitment will mean that the poorest are, once again, neither seen, listened to, nor learnt from, when much of the rationale for RRA is to make time to find the poorest, to learn from them, and to empower them.

Potentials

Despite these caveats, the potential is vast, and we are only seeing the tip of the iceberg. Already RRA has been used for appraisal and analysis in many subject areas. These include agro-ecosystems; natural resources, forestry and the environment; irrigation; technology and innovation; health and nutrition; farming systems research and extension; marketing; organizations; social, cultural and economic conditions; and a large number of special topics. Many other applications can be expected, urban as well as rural, and in the North as well as the South. In addition, for the 1990s, three major areas of potential stand out.

First, RRA has to date still made rather little impression in universities and training institutes. The University of Khon Kaen is an outstanding exception. Only when many more universities and other tertiary institutions for education and training employ RRA, and a new generation of professionals is well versed in its philosophy and methods, will it finally and securely take root. The potential for applications in training and education remains enormous and still largely unrecognized.

Second, all too often senior officials and academics who pronounce and prescribe on rural development lack recent direct knowledge, and base their analysis and action on ignorance or on personal experience which is decades out of date. RRA can bring them face-to-face with rural people. It can keep them up to date and can correct error. It can provide learning which is intellectually exciting, practically relevant, and often fun.

Third, PRA supports decentralization and diversity, allowing and enabling local people to take command of their resources and to determine what fits their needs. Nothing in rural development is ever a panacea, and PRA faces problems of spread, scale and quality control. As we enter the 1990s, however, it does present one promising approach for rural development outsiders to explore. ●

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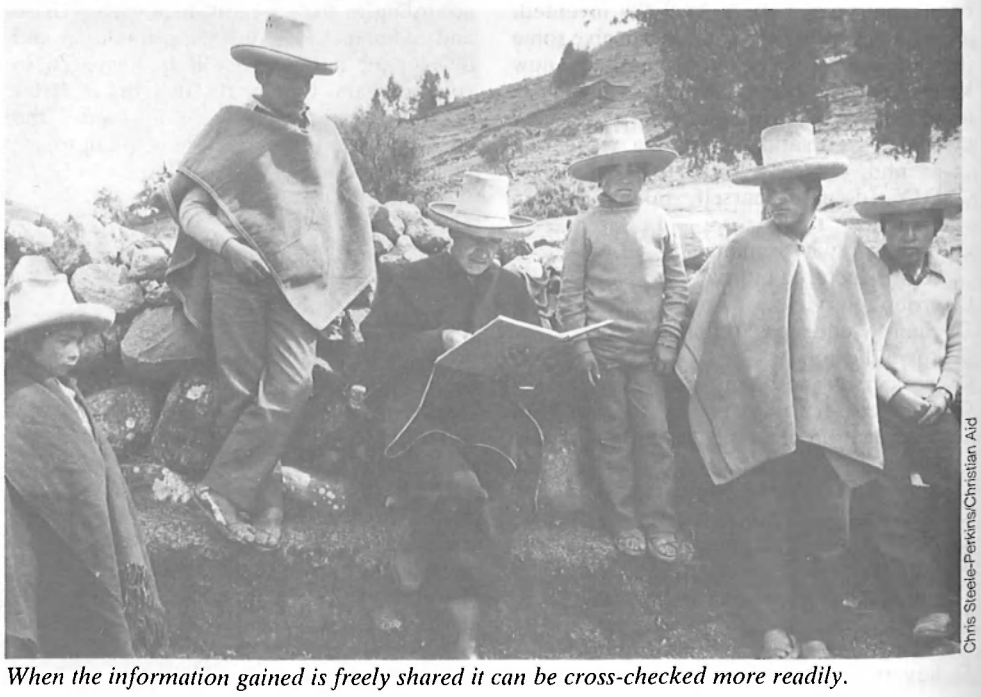
Note

A short list of recommended reading on RRA and PRA is given on p.31.



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When the information gained is freely shared it can be cross-checked more readily.